**Personal Essay**

The Seed of Doubt

I will hear an inspirational story about some exceptional athletes or incredibly successful people and compare their lives to mine. These people went through certain hardships or challenges that shaped them into the people they are today. They say that they used these difficult experiences to drive them toward their accomplishments. Shortly after I’d hear the story, I always looked into my life to see what I can use to drive myself to success, what hardships have I encountered? I would dig through my entire life, looking for something that was heart wrenching. Nothing. I would find nothing. Nothing that I thought would be powerful enough to even compare. Everyone seems to have some sort of challenge but my challenges never seemed to measure up, always so miniscule. I sometimes felt like my life has been so easy compared to others. Do not get me wrong, I am not complaining; I am incredibly thankful for never encountering life altering events, but it just makes me wonder. I was searching through my deepest and faintest childhood memories, however I failed to look at my life right now; my most recent and current obstacle. How did I miss this? It was so obvious that I must have just looked right past it.

I play Division 1, college softball at Longwood University: we are currently ranked 49 in the nation. So, I would say we are not too shabby. On top of that, and my opinion may be biased, I would say that we have one of the most difficult programs in NCAA. Coach Kathy Riley strongly believes in having her players be in the prime of shape… physically and mentally. While physically it has been as daunting as I expected, the mental aspect has been the surprise. To be blunt, it has been kicking my butt.

Coming in I was definitely stressed out about the physical aspect and not being prepared for the fitness test, but I knew that I would be able to push my body when I needed to. What I was really worried about was my mental toughness. Before committing my junior year to play at Longwood, I was on the brink of just calling it quits and not playing collegiate softball. I could not find a university that had a good softball program and was a campus I thought I would enjoy. When I received the call to play at Longwood late in my junior year of high school, I knew I had found my home. I loved the school, and the softball program was outstanding. I knew it would be tough, and I have always been driven by tough coaching and difficult competition. I was, and still am, incredibly happy with my choice. At the time I was the last recruit for my class. I made my commitment quite a bit later than the other recruits, and a tiny seed was planted in my head that I was really not as good as them, sort of a last resort pick. In the time between when I committed and the first day of college, we lost two recruits and picked up two different ones. While this may not seem important, I did not realize that the tiny seed was growing as the normal anxieties of preparing for college began to hit. By the time I arrived on campus I had allowed the seem to root and secretly worried I was at the bottom of the skill barrel. But my confidence, which is critical to success in collegiate sports, was shaken.

On top of struggling with confidence, I was now coming to a program where I would be tested to my physical and mental limits with no comforting factors. No teammates I had been friends with since I was wetting the bed or a mother to come home to that would always see the silver-lining. I now had Coach Riley. Some players may have even referred to her as a drill sergeant. She is not just hard core on being fit but is also an incredibly intelligent woman who knows her players so well, she can easily challenge each and everyone’s mental toughness. She somehow knows our mental weaknesses, and pokes at our insecurities. Painful as that is, her only wish is to see us all surpass her expectations. She may be one of the smartest coaches you will ever meet, but I could never tell her that; I would not hear the end of it! Coach knows how to keep a room of anxious softball players waiting to see what our morning conditioning is, but also knows what it takes to bring us together even if it means us turning on her. She is a woman who knows that perfection is impossible, yet still wants us to strive to be the best and give it our all.

After the struggles of fall ball and the torture called conditioning, spring ball finally came around. Every player had talked about how much more fun it was and how all the hard work pays off. We play maybe one or two games during the week days and three games over the span of the weekend. It was fun, however I didn’t and still don’t get to see the field that much. Maybe an at-bat a game? If that. It is incredibly hard going from being a senior in high school, starting every game, being looked up to and respected to being in the bottom again. As I said, I have always been someone who struggles with confidence, however I thought I had that under control until college. Even through the fall I thought, “Just wait, you’ll work over winter break and get better and start some games.” Now that we are here, though, and reality set in, it has been taking a major toll on who I am and what I believe I can do. I thought I had lost my confidence. But then, one day, when an opportunity presented itself, I was able to start as the DH (designated hitter, a position that only hits). I had been having a less than average game, two strike outs and one walk. Finally, in my fourth at-bat, I had another opportunity: two outs, runner on first, and we were down one run. One pitch goes by, strike. Second pitch comes by… wham! I hit a line drive down the right field foul line. I’m sprinting, the runner on first scores and the game is tied, I end up on third. I am the winning run, heaving, trying to catch my breath and find any way possible to score. The first two pitches are strikes. The third pitch is thrown in the dirt and gets past the catcher. I find myself sprinting again, as if my life depended on it. I dove in and watched my hands glide across the plate as the catcher picked up the ball. Safe, I though in disbelief, I was safe. Shock ran through my body, I was motionless as my team screamed and jumped around me, hugging me, smacking my helmet. After the game I felt like this was the moment I had been waiting for, I just needed a breakthrough so I could finally get back to the way I knew I could play.

Or so I thought. That following Wednesday, we played Duke, a team that we should’ve beat but lost to by a few runs. I grounded out my first at-bat and struck out my other three. My heart sank and I was back to where I had been before my game-winning hit. I had lost all of the confidence I had in a single game. It is crazy how it takes days, weeks maybe, to build up confidence again when I can lose it all in an instant. I convinced myself I was no longer a good athlete, that I didn’t deserve to be there. I let that seed grow back once again, but this time, stronger and deeper. To top it off, my coach pulled me aside and made it clear that she was “disappointed in me and my performance.” I think it is safe to say that someone being disappointed in you is way worse than someone being mad at you. This took an even bigger toll on my confidence; I could feel the heavy pit in my chest with every breathe I took. I would replay the conversation in my head as if it was the Grey’s Anatomy I had recorded from last Thursday. This would send me into a downward spiral of self-pity and pain. My brain would subconsciously play it in my head anytime I was expected to do anything that required confidence; so, that included everything softball related. I found myself questioning every decision and movement I made. Some things that once came so easily to me as walking, now felt like I was trying to teach myself rocket science.

I did finally come to the conclusion that this was not just Coach Riley telling me what I already knew, but also testing me to see if I would bounce back and be better. But what did not change was the damage that I had inflicted on myself. If we are all being honest, I was disappointed in myself too, but instead of wallowing I needed to step up my game and come back with some fight. A quote by Confucius states that, “Our greatest glory is not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall.”

Growing up my mother had always told me that I was my own worst enemy. You see, I beat myself in 90% of the situations by convincing myself that I was not good enough. I took myself out of the game, mentally. Softball is known to be a game of failure, hell 70% of the time you fail, while the very little 30% are successes. I allowed my failures to weigh me down instead of using them to make myself better. I was on an emotional rollercoaster. My highs and successes were incredibly thrilling, but when the drops came, they were far lower and more destructive. It got to the point where I was afraid to do anything because I did not want to make a mistake. I played in fear and it took my attention away from the important things: actually, feeling my body and mind firing at full capacity playing the sport I love. All of these events are fairly recent and these discoveries are brand new, so I have definitely not mastered staying positive nor do I get any more playing time; at least not yet. But I hope to be able to take my own advice and play to my full capability.

So here is my lesson, my call to action, my ‘last lecture’ if you will: get off that emotional roller coaster. Play to have fun but don’t let your mistakes define you, and don’t let anyone else either. Do not let that seed root itself in you and take over everything you do. While my lesson is centered around sports, I feel like it also surrounds everything in our lives. You bomb a test, say something hurtful to a friend, or just make a poor decision, while those are all not so great things (and definitely at different levels), do not let them run your life. Stay true to who you know you are and just learn from your mistakes, embrace them.